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TAGS: PHUM PREL TU

SUBJECT: ALEVI GROUP PUSHES FOR EQUAL FUNDING AND RELIGIOUS EDUCATION

REF: ANKARA 1883

Classified By: CG DAVID ARNETT FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

1. (SBU) Summary: The Cem Foundation, an Istanbul-based Alevi organization, presented petitions to the Prime Ministry and the Ministry of Education on June 22 demanding proportional public funding for religious institutions, and changes to the religious education curriculum in Turkish public schools. Cem Foundation Chairman Izzettin Dogan tells us his organization plans to take the case to the European Court of Human Rights if Turkey's judicial system does not produce results. Claiming the federation to which his left-oriented organization belongs represents "95 percent" of Turkey's Alevis, Dogan implied his group speaks for "the Alevi community" in Turkey, but that claim is not credible given Turkish Alevis' heterogeneity, and, indeed, the existence of several different "Alevi communities" in Turkey. End summary.

Prelude to a Suit

2. (U) The Cem Foundation, an Istanbul-based Alevi organization, petitioned the Prime Ministry and the Ministry of Education on June 22 for funding and reforms to religious education. The government has 60 days to respond, after which an organization may then proceed to court. The petition to the Prime Ministry claims the Directorate of Religious Affairs is a representative of only Sunni Islam, and demands the government provide religious service to Alevis as a public service, grant Alevi "cemevi" centers status as "places of worship," employ sufficient and competent personnel as public officials to provide religious services to Alevis, and allocate funds for services for Alevis. The petition to the Education Ministry concludes with these demands: more inclusive preparation of curriculum for religious classes, including participation of Alevi leaders; amendment of textbook content to include information about Alevi faith and culture; teacher training on any changes made; and the creation of monitoring mechanisms to follow implementation of relevant changes.

How Many Alevis Are There, Anyway? And Who Represents them?

3. (SBU) In a July 6 meeting with poloff, Dogan, accompanied by the Foundation's General Manager and two members, elaborated upon the petitions, claiming that the government spends state funds on some 100,000 mosques around the country, many of which employ as many five officials, while there are no state resources devoted to the opening of "cemevis." The Cem Foundation asserts that there are as many as 25 million Alevis in Turkey, or approximately 35 percent of the population, and believes that state expenditures on religious institutions should reflect that by dividing funds proportionally among religious groups. (Note: Official State figures, normally kept confidential and based on extensive family-tree archives, show that the number of Alevis in Turkey is closer to 7 million, approximately ten percent of the population. End note.)

4. (U) On a recent Turk Haber television program, Dogan said, he debated Parliament's Education Commission Chair, AK Party member and former Director of Religious Affairs Tayyar Altikulac, about funding issues. Dogan told us that when he asserted there were 25 million Alevis and that the state budget should reflect that, Altikulac responded that there were at most 8 million Alevis. To that Dogan retorted that the community would be happy to take only a seventh of the budget then, as a start.

5. (SBU) Dogan, told poloff the Cem Foundation is an affiliate of the Federation of Alevi Foundations, which Dogan asserts brings together "14 or 15 of the 19 or 20" Alevi foundations and represents 95 percent of the Alevis in Turkey. (Note: Dogan's brother heads the Malatya Cem Foundation; he told us in March 2005 (reftel) that this new federation of foundations was being formed, with 12 having united at that time. End note.) Dogan's claim that the newly formed Federation represents "95 percent" of Alevis in Turkey, however, is not credible when one considers the heterogeneity of Alevis in Turkey, and indeed the existence

of several distinct "Alevi communities."

16. (SBU) A recent report in Milliyet newspaper illustrated some of the complexities of Alevi identity, at least among urban Alevis, by citing a survey that found 34.5 percent of city-dwelling Alevis describe their religious identity as Alevi only, 32 percent as both Muslim and Alevi, 12.1 percent as Muslim only, 3.4 percent as Kizilbas, 2.9 percent as Bektasi (the latter two orders within the Alevi tradition), 14.6 percent as atheist, and 5 percent as humanist. Ethnic Kurdish Alevis, the report crosstabulated, were more prone to identify as Alevi only or atheist, while Turkish Alevis more often said they were Muslim or both Muslim and Alevi. Results in rural Anatolia would be different, but would also demonstrate diverse views about beliefs and identities. Moreover, there are various political leanings among Alevis, from extreme leftwing to apolitical to at least one group that some assert is building ties with (Sunni) "political Islam." It would be difficult for any one group to credibly claim to speak for "the Alevi community."

Hasn't anyone heard of Whirling Dervishes?

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17. (SBU) Turning to the matter of mandatory religious instruction, Dogan claimed there is no mention in the current curriculum of the association with Alevism of important figures and traditions in Turkish history including folk poet Yunus Emre, humanist Haci Bektas, and the Mevlana sect. The lack of education about Alevi traditions and historical figures contributes to a lack of pride and interest among youth in being Alevi, he said, estimating some 4-5 percent of young Alevis are "atheist." Dogan said that government officials have claimed there will be 20 new books in the coming year in which Alevism does receive mention, and that the curriculum will reflect new thinking. But Dogan questioned where the content of this curriculum is coming from, adding that no one had asked him or his foundation for input.

The Saz - Instrument or Symbol? Or Joke?

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18. (C) Press reports about the Cem Foundation's petition included mention of a demand that the "saz" (a type of long-necked lute) be accepted as a musical instrument in schools. (Note: The saz is believed to have "descended" from the Kopuz stringed instruments used by Turkish tribes over a thousand years ago. From the 1500's onwards, Alevi dervishes traveling the countryside of Anatolia used the saz in ceremonies and songs, the lyrics of which focused, among other things, on love, mysticism, and rebellion, often reflecting Alevi resistance to rising Ottoman Sunni power and struggle against Sunni repression. Thus, many see the saz as a symbol of that resistance. End note.) Dogan claimed the press overplayed the petition's mention of the saz. The purpose of including it in the petition, he said, was to advocate that the saz be seen as just another musical instrument, rather than a threatening symbol, if a student wanted to use it in musical instruction. Separately, Galatasaray University law professor Emre Oktan, an expert on religious minorities who studied under Dogan in years past, told poloff that the mention of the saz alongside the other demands related to education might trivialize the petition and its contents in the eyes of public opinion.

19. (SBU) Dogan also pointed to the use of state media for religious programming as an area where the Alevi community would like equal access. Currently there are seven state TV channels and RTUK should divide access to those channels equally among religious groups for programming, he said. Finally, he touched briefly upon the need for equity in terms of institutions for training religious leaders.

110. (SBU) Comment: It is not clear how many of the estimated seven million Alevis in Turkey support Dogan's tactics and plans, but the attention paid to Alevis in last year's EU Progress Report may have given the Cem Foundation and other Alevi groups more energy and incentive to go public in demanding increased rights (despite their distaste at being called a "non-Sunni Muslim minority" in that report.) Dogan does not expect a response to the petitions, nor satisfactory solutions from the Turkish judiciary, and appears prepared to take the case to the ECHR. An eventual Cem Foundation case in the ECHR would join an already pending one, filed in January 2004, by an Alevi parent who claims obligatory religious education violates the freedom of religion. Just as the ethnic Kurdish community has turned to the ECHR in seeking rights and compensations they have not been able to achieve inside Turkey, the Alevi community may begin to follow suit.

111. (C) Comment, cont'd: Beyond the belief of radical Sunnis that Alevis are not even Muslim, there are administrative issues at stake. The question of financing places of worship highlights the fear in Turkey's religious

bureaucracy that if it recognizes cemevis today, it will have to go further and recognize other venues tomorrow. The proportional approach to these questions does not seem to provide a way forward, in the absence of reliable statistics about who is what, combined with the absence of consensus about what constitutes a religion worthy of funding. The GOT, however, as it continues the EU process, must find some solution better than the approach it took last January, when a Diyanet letter asserted that cemevis, where one-tenth of the population worship, "violate Islamic principles and Turkish law."

ARNETT